

Mark 10 35-45

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. 'Teacher,' they said, 'we want you to do for us whatever we ask.'

³⁶'What do you want me to do for you?' he asked.

³⁷They replied, 'Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.'

³⁸'You don't know what you are asking,' Jesus said. 'Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?'

³⁹'We can,' they answered.

Jesus said to them, 'You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with, ⁴⁰but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.'

⁴¹When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴²Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Some 22 years ago, Sarah spent a year of her university study in Alexandria, in Egypt, learning Arabic. She was about 20 years old, and very good looking — and of course had the distinction that her hair was brown and not jet black, and her skin was pretty pale and not nearly as dark as an Egyptian. She was... noticeable.

One day she went to church in the local coptic church and took a seat. Another woman — later middle-aged — walks in and walks past. And then walks past going the other way. And then again. And then again. And then sat down some seats away. And then got up and moved right next to Sarah. And then announced — 'my son in an engineer!'

In Matthew's gospel the equivalent story makes it James and John's mother who comes and asks the question of Jesus — can my sons sit on either side of your throne? There is no change, really, in the ambition that mothers have for their sons.

And there is no change really in the nature of ambition for ourselves either. Mark's story makes the brothers the ones who address Jesus directly. They must know there's something wrong with their request, because they start with 'we want you to do for us whatever we ask!' Surely this the least subtle hint that something wildly ambitious is coming! And they know that it's a bit cheeky.

And as if they hadn't worked it out already, Jesus says — 'no, I just can't give that to you, and also, remember that if you want to be greatest, you must be the servant of all.'

There is a double irony here, because while James and John are picturing very grand thrones, Jesus, who had already been predicting his crucifixion, knows that he will come into his kingdom on the cross. James and John are unwittingly asking to be crucified beside him. It is a double irony, because they are indeed destined to suffer. James was martyred barely a few years after Jesus's crucifixion, to make an example of him. John lived a very long life, that included exile on Patmos.

So that's the story. But we all agree that the subject is ambition. The word ambition comes from the latin 'ambire' which means going around — so the allusion is to political candidates

canvassing for votes is an interesting indicator of how we really picture ambition — casting around for favour and power.

I should add, too, that we are talking about *selfish* ambition. Ambition for yourself or for your family, that you or they might be the first, the richest, the best, the most brilliant.

At the time of Jesus pride — a clearly related character trait — was applauded. Actually, we still applaud pride and ambition. 'Take pride in your work!' we say. We admire the hard work of those who are ambitious for success.

And Jesus changed all that. He modelled, and argued for, humility. Thinking less of yourself. Deflating your ego down to the right level. Strangely this is not the same as subservience, because I think subservience is not that straightforward. Mr Collins, in *Pride and Prejudice* is subservient to Lady Catherine de Burgh — grovelling, obsequious and sycophantic towards her... but actually taking great pride in his closeness to the great lady. So Jesus is no advocate of grovelling subservience but thinking simply about yourself. Getting yourself at the right level. Loving your neighbour as yourself, and, logically, loving yourself as well as your neighbour.

This is hard. Now, I don't see any of us here being uncontrollably ambitious, but we do see uncontrollably selfish ambition in the world, which then generates huge conflict and grief. In Richard Dawkins's book 'The Selfish Gene', Dawkins talks of life itself being hard-wired to strive for the success of its genes. It is more subtle than simple selfishness though. It is being wired to do what you can for those who share your genetic material — your family. Hence the behaviour of James and John's mum in Matthew's telling of the story, and of the Egyptian mum who thought Sarah might be a nice catch for her engineer son. The point is that God made us with an inbuilt favouritism towards ourselves or our family. And now Jesus wants to 'reprogram' us! And he does, indeed do this. Because he treats everyone like they are brothers and sisters, and puts his own brothers and sisters only on the same level as others. I've heard people describe this as 'fictive kinship groups'. We know we're not blood relatives, but we act as if we were. If we really lived as if everyone were family, this would be extraordinarily revolutionary, wouldn't it?

And I can think of an example of how this has worked in real life. The monastic movement began around 400AD and for a thousand years it was remarkably successful at promoting real Christian faith and charity across a pretty uncivilised world. I suspect that integral to that success was that the monastery worked as a 'fake family'. Monks called each other brother. Nuns were sisters, everything was held in common. Each was the servant of the other, and of the world outside the monastery doors. It fell apart, eventually, because monasteries ended up working so well that they amassed wealth, influence and power... which proved a temptation to the ambitious.

So how do we live this life of selflessness (with dignity, and not subservience)? It comes back to love. Love can make us give up personal ambition if that is necessary for the good of all. Love can make us work hard for the greater good. We don't need to forego great achievements in our humility — that is still on the cards — but love makes us not give up even if it looks like we won't get glory at the end of it all.

And where do we get this great love from? We certainly get better at this if we try harder. We can train in love, just as we can train in other things. But we can also love more if we have access to God's love. So, in prayer, be open to God's love for you, be open to the Holy Spirit, who can make us more loving than we might be on our own. And we can actually be servants of all and be glad of it — through the great love of our great God.

Amen.